

## The Use of the Comic in The Mystery Plays

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Many of the characters and incidents we meet in the Mystery Plays are taken from the Bible which describes them in a restrained tone by its nature. When the dramatists of the Mystery Plays made use of these materials that tend to be quite didactic, they had to think of techniques that could attract an audience's attention and interest. The use of the comic is one and if we cannot call any one of the Mystery Plays 'comedy' the comical elements prevail in the whole cycle.

The most immediate effect of the comic is laughter and the plays cause different types of laughter depending upon circumstances. This essay is going to deal with mainly two kinds of laughter : nervous and comfortable. As we experience in the daily life, laughter can be nervous. Arnold Williams says that "laughter is a possible response to something threatening," and "under certain circumstances the downright terrifying can produce laughter."<sup>1</sup> This kind of laughter is raised by Cain, Herod, the soldiers, the devils, and so on.

In the Towneley *Killing of Abel*, the dramatist gives Cain a blasphemous character in order to make the motive of his killing of his brother easy to understand. He begins with complaints about the hardships of life just like the shepherds in the two *Shepherds* plays in the same cycle. They differ, however, that while the shepherds seek mercy on them, Cain accuses God of being unkind to him, even calling God a 'foe.' After Abel finishes his prayer to God in paying tithe, Cain comes up to the altar and begins to count, and deliberately miscount, the sheaves that he is, or is not, going to offer.

Oone shefe, oone, and this makys two,  
Bot nawder of thise may I forgo.

Two, two, now this is thre,  
Yei, this also shall leif with me:  
For I will chose and best have —  
This hold I thrift — of all this thrafe.

(ll. 192–7)<sup>2</sup>

He goes on mocking like this and, after all, only two sheaves will be offered. This technique of not giving while making one anticipate something will be given is still a popular comical trick. The medieval audience in a highly Christianized society, knowing that Cain's conduct is nothing to be laughed at, would have found Cain comical.

This evil comic is carried on by Herod, soldiers, and the devils. Herod is boastful and blasphemous, and esteems himself as glorious and omnipotent as God in the York *Introduction to The Three Kings*. In the following *Adoration*, and the Coventry *Sheamen and Tailors' Play*, however, Herod proves himself quite incompetent as a ruler. Without the counselors who give him advice about what to do with the problems, he can do nothing but to rage in fury. He is just a quick-tempered tyrant. The stage direction to the Coventry play says that when Herod knows that his plan to follow the kings to find out where the baby has been born has failed, he 'ragis in the pagond and in the strete also' shouting,

I stampe! I stare! I loke all aboutt!  
Myght I them take, I schuld them bren at a glede!  
I rent! I rawe! and now run I wode!

(ll. 779–81)

Knowing the vanity of pride and his ignorance, this maddening rage is easily convertible into the comic which causes nervous laughter.

In the York *Crucifixion*, four soldiers are busy at nailing Christ on the cross. They have made holes in the part of the cross where his hands and legs

are to be nailed. But the holes are found not in the right place. In order to solve the problem, the soldiers stretch Christ's arms and legs so that they reach to the holes. Then the soldiers carry the cross to Calvary, drop it hard, and raise it with many complaints. The story is one of the most sorrowful moments in the life of Christ, and the soldiers' words and actions are grotesque. If we think that the soldiers are comical, it is due to the fact that they are ignorant and do not know what they are doing.

Cain's blasphemy, Herod's and the soldiers' cruelty and rage are comical in their own way. The audience, however, would not have shared sympathy with them. In the context of the didacticism of the Mystery Plays, the effect of this type of the comic works as a mirror in which the audience would see an abominable cruelty they might do themselves. This may be the significance that the dramatists intended to put in the grotesque-comical elements in these plays.

There is one group of characters who are depicted as comical : the devils. Even Satan is not so awfully evil in the Mystery Plays. In the Chester *Fall of Lucifer*, he boasts out his beauty and power; he even says that he is superior to God while God is not around him. As soon as God appears on the scene Lucifer and his followers fall from Heaven to Hell, apparently in comical action. After all Satan is no match for God. In Hell, the devils blame each other, imputing the cause of the fall to the others. The two minor devils in the York *Harrowing of Hell* become uneasy knowing the dead souls are having hope of liberation. They get quite upset and do not know what to do about it. As for Satan, we could not help smiling seeing him say joyously that if, as Christ says, the bad souls would not go out of Hell, they will have more and more inhabitants of Hell because there are more bad men than good in the world. Unfortunately, his joy will not last long. Christ orders Michael to fix Satan into Hell so that he cannot go out to seek bad souls. He is not so fearful a character after all and there is room for us to enjoy the comic actions of the

devils.

We have been dealing with nervous laughter. There is another type of comic and this time we can enjoy it comfortably. Let us take Noah to begin with. The fight between Noah and his wife is perhaps shocking enough to upset our image of Noah as a type of obedient man. First, Noah's wife complains to the women in the audience on how women suffer hard lives by having ill husbands. Hearing this, Noah strikes her and she strikes him back. In the Towneley play, he gives the male audience his advice with a strong touch of anti-feminism.

Yee men that has wifis, whyls they ar yong,  
If ye luf youre lifis, chastice thare tong:  
Me thynk my hert ryfis, both levyr and long,  
To se sich stryfis wedmen emong.  
(ll. 397–400)

In the Chester play he says:

Lord, that women be crabbed aye,  
And never are meke, that dare I saye.  
This is well sene by me to-daye,  
In witnes of yow each one.  
(ll. 105–8)

In the Chester *Noah* there is no fight scene, but the wife is as obstinate as she is in the Towneley play.

This theme of anti-feminism, says Rosemary Woolf, is “repeated on a large scale in the play of Noah, where the authors are free to depict a woman who by her speech and conduct exemplifies these vices [faithlessness, avarice, lechery, vanity, disobedience, obstinance, sources of disaster to their husbands].”<sup>3</sup> So far, it seems that these two Noah plays go too far from the Bible conception of the only family chosen to survive the flood. Then the whole family get

into the Ark and the plays enter on the new phase. Noah's wife begins to co-operate with her husband and it is at this moment that we find the sign of the coming new world. The process of their fight, reconciliation, and co-operation is, therefore, consistent with the process of destruction and rebirth of the world.

Old Joseph, in the *Ludus Coventriae Joseph* and *The Nativity*, speaks and acts like an ordinary old man who has a young wife and always suspects infidelity. When he comes back from work, he finds that his wife Mary is with child. He smells foul play.

That semyth evyl, I am a frayde;  
Thi wombe to hyghe doth stonde:  
I drede me sore I am be-trayd.  
Sum other man the had in honde  
Hens sythe that I went.  
Thy wombe is gret; it gynnyth to ryse;  
Than hast thou be-gownne a synfull gyse.

(*Joseph.* ll. 25–31)

He does not believe that the father of the baby is God in Heaven and turns to the audience.

Ya, ya! all olde men to me take tent,  
And weddyth no wyf in no kynnys wyse  
That is a yonge wench, be myn a-sent.  
For doute and drede and swyche servyse,  
Alas, alas! my name is shent.  
All men may me now dyspyse  
And seyn 'Old cokwold, thi bow is bent  
Newly now, after the Frensche gyse.'

(ll. 49–56)

Indeed, who could blame Joseph though he does not believe what his wife says? His suspicion and lament is most natural and human. Joseph's warning to the audience contains anti-feminism and the theme of an old cuckold. Woolf comments that Joseph "imagines himself married to the type of character whom we have already seen in Noah's wife, and of whom the ancestor and archetype was Eve."<sup>4</sup> He imagines so, but Mary is obviously not a descendant of Eve. So when he knows the truth, he repents and retains the former relationship with Mary.

The scene changes to *The Nativity*. On the way to Bethlehem, Mary finds a cherry tree full of ripening fruit. She asks Joseph to get some for her, but old Joseph, for the tree is too high, says she had better ask the baby's father. He certainly knows that the child's father is God, but here his words remind us of his former suspicion. As if to punish his stupidity, the tree bends down and, realising this is God's will, he repents again. This is a beautiful play and Joseph gives us comfortable laughter. In the Towneley *Flight Into Egypt*, we see Joseph again complain about his old age and hard life, but it does not disturb the play's quiet atmosphere. The play of Mary and Joseph is generally quiet in tone and we are moved by the purity of Mary, her affectionate attitude toward the baby and her husband, and obedience to God. Joseph's stupidity illustrates them.

Hardships of life is recurrent in the Mystery Plays describing the world before the birth of Christ. Shepherds in both the Towneley Shepherds' Plays, who are the representatives of laymen : poor, ignorant, and waiting for the Saviour to come, complain on their lives. In *The First Shepherds' Play* the two shepherds quarrel about non-existing sheep. The First shepherd pretends that he has a hundred sheep and the Second pretends to prevent them from passing his land. It is but pretension, but they begin to fight over it. The Third shepherd comes and condemns the stupidity of his fellow shepherds. The way the Third shepherd demonstrates the stupidity of the two, however,

results in showing his own stupidity. We may laugh at them, but it also illuminates their poor and hard life. The poorer the shepherds are, the happier they become at the coming of the Saviour. The overall sufferings of them reinforces their joy, and it is the audience's joy as well, which is brought by the Angel afterwards.

The most remarkable feature in *The Second Shepherds' Play* is the Mak episode which contains the slapstick comedy of the stealing of a sheep, disguising of it as a baby, and the three shepherds' coming and presenting gifts, is a comical parody of the following birth of the baby Jesus. The comic has its own significance.

After this comes Jesus' birth. An Angel appears to the shepherds in their dream to order them to worship the baby. They give the baby a 'lytyll spruse cofer', a 'ball' and a 'botell' in *The First Shepherds' Play*; 'a bob of cherys', 'a byrd' and 'a ball' in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. These gifts make the audience smile and the smile is not contemptuous though their gifts are not so expensive as the three Kings' 'cupe-full off in-sence', 'cupe-full of golde', and 'myre.' Some symbolical meanings are suggested for the shepherds' gifts,<sup>5</sup> but without hidden symbolism, their gifts are lovely and sincere. They know, perhaps from their experience with other babies around them, that the baby would enjoy these things.

We must not forget that the comic is given to one of the disciples, Peter. In the *Ludus Coventriae Last Supper*, when Christ takes the basin and the towel so that he can wash the disciples' feet, Peter once refuses such a service from his master. Christ tells him that to refuse his service is to forsake Christ. Peter, hearing this, accepts his master's favour, but he says too much: he asks him to wash not only his feet, but his head and hands as well. Peter is a good man. Perhaps he is too good. In *The Betrayal* of the same cycle, Peter falls asleep while Christ is praying to God. This prayer touches our heart with its highly emotional contents. Christ in the Passion Plays is far more human than

God's son. Even though the death is predetermined by God, it is surely the most terrible experience that man could have. He asks God to save him from this awful fate. He weeps and blood covers his face; he trembles with fear. During his prayer, he goes back to the place three times where Peter is waiting for him, and every time Christ finds Peter fast asleep. The scene illuminates the passion that Christ must suffer alone: even his disciple does not recognise his sorrow. The fact that Peter falls asleep at this crucial moment is comical, but the effect and the contrast is great.

The comic elements can be divided into several groups as we have seen. The grotesque nervous laughter of Herod, Cain, and the soldiers, the comfortable laughter of Noah and Joseph, and the comfortable but at the same time serious laughter of Peter. Some comical elements describe God's enemy as the more evil, some is entertaining, some serves as contrast. In every case, the dramatist used all of his imagination in creating comical elements which were not inconsistent with the story nor destroyed the Biblical theme of the Mystery Plays.

## NOTES

1. Arnold Williams, 'The Comic in the Cycles' *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies* 16, (Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 115.
2. All the quotations are taken from *English Mystery Plays*, (Penguin, 1975).
3. Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Play*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 123.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
5. Happe quotes Joseph A. Longo, 'Symmetry and Symbolism in the *Secunda Pastorum*', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 13. 1969, pp. 65-85, and says 'cherries' indicate 'blood and death' which is paralled to myrrh; 'bird'



represents 'divinity', parallel to frankincense; 'ball' stands for 'kingship', parallel to gold.

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### Criticism

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